



## IMPROVING US-CHINA CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS—THINKING BEYOND THE AIR AND SEA

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As the Pentagon's [China Task Force](#) prepares to deliver its final report to Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin next month, one of the key issues on the table is how to strengthen US-China crisis communications. The focus is likely to center on improving safety for air and maritime encounters near China's borders and handling crises if they occur. This is logical given the occasional "near misses" between US and Chinese forces—a repeat of [the 2001 EP-3 incident](#) could be a disaster. But there are already rules on the books and misaligned interests mean that encouraging China to enforce them will be difficult. US policymakers should not overlook the chance of productive talks for crises in other domains, including on land and in nuclear, space, and cyber, where the rules are more ambiguous and both sides have reasons for restraint.

Crisis communications talks can be useful under two conditions: incomplete mechanisms or "rules of the road" that require new agreements and common interests that promote enforcement and refinement of existing rules. The Obama administration focused on air and maritime cooperation because of the lack of concrete agreements. The 1998 Military Maritime Consultative Agreement (MMCA), created after the 1995-96 Taiwan Strait crisis, provided a venue for the two sides to discuss maritime incidents but lacked the detailed protocols that Washington had reached with Moscow in the 1972 [Incidents at Sea](#) agreement.

Driven by leadership from both Obama and Xi, the two sides agreed to a [similar protocol](#) for US-China naval encounters in 2014; an annex covering [air incidents](#) was added the following year. Encouraged by Washington, China also [agreed to follow](#) the multilateral Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea at the Western Pacific Naval Symposium in 2014.

With detailed rules already on the books, the next step for both sides should be greater enforcement and consultation when incidents do happen. The problem is that the incentives for each side are misaligned. Washington seeks the predictability and stability of safe air and naval encounters, but China's strategy for dissuading the United States from operating freely in the Western Pacific or intervening on behalf of an ally (or Taiwan) benefits from the "[costly signal](#)" offered by dangerous intercepts—one example was a September 2018 close call in which a Chinese destroyer [maneuvered](#) within 45 yards of the *USS Decatur* in the South China Sea. Chinese representatives, with less to lose, also [refused to participate](#) in an MMCA dialogue scheduled for December 2020. Crisis communications talks are of little value when one side refuses to follow existing protocols or participate in discussions.

Given the challenges for making current agreements stick, US officials should have low expectations for "more communications channels and mechanisms" in these domains, as [Kurt Campbell and Jake Sullivan](#) put it in 2019. One idea occasionally discussed is expanding the naval agreement to cover the Chinese Coast Guard and the People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia, which have been involved in several tense incidents with US ships over the years, or to include representatives from these forces in the MMCA. But China's incentive is to retain maximum flexibility of these assets, which are helpful in a "gray zone" campaign of gradually expanding control of contested regions without resorting to war. Thus, Beijing has shown little willingness to expand the regime to include "white hull" ships.

There have also been periodic calls for a maritime and air "hotline," such as a link between the US Indo-Pacific Command and a PLA theater command. The two sides have managed to establish three hotlines so far: a presidential link in 1998, a link connecting the

defense ministries in 2008, and [space hotline](#) in 2015. However, as Kurt Campbell recently noted, China has been reluctant to use these systems in real-world situations, with the phones essentially ringing out in “[empty rooms](#).” Even if Beijing were more willing to use these systems, a new hotline linking operational forces would be of little value given the PLA’s more centralized decision-making structure.

With limited hope for progress in these domains, members of the China Task Force should look for progress elsewhere. One potential avenue is discussions on land crises. Unlike the air and maritime domains, there are no detailed protocols for how land forces can communicate and resolve crises. The two sides, to be sure, are not preparing for a land conflict against the other but could find themselves in one given a disaster on the Korean Peninsula. Lack of communication could set the stage for accidental fire incidents or miscalculations about each side’s intentions.

Historically, Beijing has had no appetite for discussing Korean contingencies with the United States, apart from some conversations among academics. Such talks, from China’s perspectives, would amount to collusion with Pyongyang’s primary enemy and thus risk narrowing China’s own leverage with the hermit kingdom. Nevertheless, China has an interest in avoiding an unnecessary clash with US and Republic of Korea forces, and discussions with the PLA do not need to be focused explicitly on Korea to have value in such a contingency. The two might, for instance, consider holding a crisis simulation tied to a terrorist threat against China’s overseas interests in which forces from both sides are part of the solution. This would help generate ideas about how both sides would operate and quickly communicate and deconflict their activities, without alienating North Korea.

Crisis communications might also be strengthened in the “strategic domains”—space, cyber, and nuclear. Like the land domain, there are no in-depth protocols between China and the United States covering conflict escalation within or between these arenas. While China has incentives to seek advantage in these domains, including targeting US infrastructure or space systems to achieve what PLA strategists call

“[integrated strategic deterrence](#)” against US intervention, Beijing is also vulnerable to retaliatory strikes. Several incipient changes in China’s nuclear posture, including a move to a “[launch on warning](#)” system and advent of dual-use long-range missiles, are also creating new challenges for nuclear stability that need to be addressed. It is thus encouraging that retired Major General Yao Yunzhu, one of China’s leading authorities in crisis management, has [proposed new talks](#) on “strategic stability” in the nuclear realm, including on the targeting of nuclear command and control structures, as well as “standards, rules, and norms” for space, cyber, and artificial intelligence.

The new US administration should consider several mutually supporting ways of bringing crisis communications in these domains into the picture. Detailed talks at the Track 1.5 level might be helpful, especially if the PLA itself is represented; this may include crisis simulations testing the utility of the existing procedures or hotlines in a nuclear conflict (or highlighting the need for changes to those systems). This might be augmented by discussions of space, cyber, and nuclear issues in high-level forums such as the Defense Consultative Talks (which have been on hold since 2014). Finally, Washington should support talks involving forces that currently do not communicate much with foreigners, including the Strategic Support Force and Rocket Force. Such talks would be of use even if they shed a small amount of light into this otherwise opaque part of the PLA.

In short, expectations for new air and maritime agreements should be low and military relations may only be helpful in warding off provocative PLA moves by amplifying US messages about the consequences of conflict. Those messages can be sent diplomatically but are probably more effectively received through sustained presence, new deployments and operational concepts, and coordination with US allies and partners. If a crisis does occur, it is up to China to follow agreements on the books and use existing hotlines.

Instead, US policymakers should focus on areas where the rules aren’t already clear and there are common interests. Coming to agreements in the larger context of mutual mistrust and great power

competition will be difficult, but with support of the Biden and Xi administrations, may help make crises beyond the air and maritime domains more predictable.

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